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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: A/S BURNS UPDATES VATICAN ON MEPP, IRAQ

REF: A. A) 03 VATICAN 5644

1B. B) VATICAN 3079

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) Holy See Foreign Minister Lajolo agreed with NEA A/S Burns December 9 that there were signs of "a better situation" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and he emphasized that "both sides" now needed to move forward with the Road Map. On Iraq elections, Lajolo welcomed Burns' assurance that they would be held as scheduled, and was unfazed by his caveat that they would not be flawless. Lajolo said elections did not have to be perfect as long as they created an adequate sense of legitimacy for the new government among Iraqis. Lajolo was interested in Burns' assessment of the security situation in Iraq, and appreciated the Assistant Secretary's assurances of continued USG attention to the plight of Christians there. Burns also reviewed current USG thinking on Syria, Iran, and Libya. End Summary.

Signs of Hope

12. (C) Holy See Foreign Minister equivalent Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo concurred with NEA Assistant Secretary William Burns' assessment in a December 9 meeting at the Vatican that there were signs of "a better situation" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lajolo emphasized that renewed commitment was now needed from "both sides" to reinvigorate the Road Map. According to Lajolo, Arafat's exit from the scene gave the Palestinians an opportunity for "more active engagement" against terrorism. The Israelis, for their part, needed to be more committed to maintaining peace and should go out of their way to avoid provocations, Lajolo maintained.

Equal Treatment Crucial

13. (C) A/S Burns emphasized President Bush's commitment to progress in resolving the conflict and his determination to move forward despite continuing challenges. Lajolo underlined the need for the USG to appear even-handed in brokering the dispute. "The impression of equal treatment" of the Israelis and Palestinians is crucial, he said. Burns noted that the more the Palestinians acted against terrorism, the better the USG could work with Israel on freedom of movement issues, settlement activity, and other Palestinian concerns.

Iraq: Elections Don't Need to be Perfect

14. (C) Turning to Iraq, Burns told Lajolo that Iraqi elections would be held as scheduled in January, but cautioned that the process would not be flawless. Lajolo was unfazed. "They don't have to be perfect," he said, as long as they create a sense of legitimacy for the government among Iraqis. Burns noted continuing security challenges, and recounted his recent meeting in Baghdad with various Christian leaders. He assured Lajolo of continued U.S. attention to the plight of Christians there, and said that Ambassador Negroponte's door has been and will remain open to Iraq Christian groups. Lajolo acknowledged the Vatican's continued preoccupation with security for the Christian community, and its longer-term concern about the exodus of Christians from Iraq. Noting that there had been another bombing of a Catholic Church the day before in Mosul, Lajolo said he appreciated USG efforts to give continuing priority to the issue.

15. (C) Lajolo noted that PM Allawi had seemed optimistic about security issues during their November Vatican meeting. "I don't know how he could be," Lajolo quipped, but he

suggested that with Iraqis comprising such a large number of victims of the terrorist attacks, a backlash against the insurgents could grow in time. Burns agreed, and said he had seen evidence of a backlash, at least against foreign insurgents.

Regional Issues

16. (C) As in his previous meeting with A/S Burns (ref a), Lajolo raised the Holy See's interest in the roles of Syria and Iran in the region. Burns explained the USG's security concerns on the Syrian-Iraqi border and on support for insurgents in Iraq from Iraqi Baathists in Damascus. Lajolo was also interested in Burns' current take on Syria's influence on Lebanon. On Iran, Lajolo seemed unconvinced about the nuclear danger posed by the regime. Burns said there was ample evidence of Iran's nuclear ambitions, and pointed to its lack of honesty with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). He emphasized, however, that the U.S. was committed to diplomatic means to resolve the situation. Lajolo expressed hope that the student population in Iran and the power of the internet might help to bring about change. Burns acknowledged both the potential and the limitations of these factors, and said the prospects for imminent change were not great. On Libya, Lajolo mentioned rumors of Ghadafi's intent to install his son as a successor, and noted recent travel to that country by many Italians.

Comment

17. (C) The Middle East remains the region of priority concern for the Holy See, which continues to regard the Israel-Palestinian divide as the 'mother of all conflicts' in the region and an ongoing fuel for terrorism. The Vatican's concerns about the exodus of Christians from Iraq mirror a larger concern about the demise of historic Christian communities throughout the region which one member of the Curia recently suggested to us would leave the whole region virtually devoid of Christian communities in a generation or two. Archbishop Lajolo, accompanied by 2005 IVP awardee and Regional Director for the Middle East Monsignor Franco Coppola, clearly appreciated the chance to hear A/S Burns' perspective on the full range of issues in the region.

18. (U) A/S Burns has cleared this message.

19. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

NICHOLSON

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